

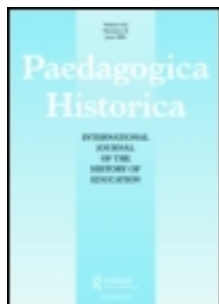
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Dangerous Media? Panic Discourses and Dilemmas of Modernity

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The article focuses on the history of so-called media panics, i.e. emotionally charged reactions on the appearance of new media. Tracing "la longue durée" of panics over print, film and computer media and taking examples from Britain, Germany, Sweden and Denmark, the author argues that media panics are intrinsic and recurrent features of modernity. They represent a complex constellation of generational, cultural and existential power struggles through which adults seek to negotiate definitions of character forming ("Bildung") in order to balance fundamental dilemmas of modernity.

In July 1998 - the silly season - news groups on the Internet publicise a trailer for a news story that is immediately taken up and printed by a range of newspapers around the world bringing about heated discussions in many countries: Diane and Mike, US citizens aged 18, are going to transmit their first sexual intercourse via the net and the intimate first night is going to take place on 4 August. According to the Internet address "www.ourfirsttime.com" the lofty aim of this affair is to further global sex education and the general edification of young people.

Public reactions range from Christian groups wanting to prohibit the session to ironic "competitors" creating sites such as "ourfirstanalsex" and "ourfirstlesbiansex." The webmaster on the "www.ourfirsttime.com" site calls

*The article is an updated and revised version of my article "Modernity and Media Panics," in Kim Christian Schröder & Michael Skovmand (Eds), *Media Cultures: Reappraising Transnational Media* (London, Routledge, 1992), pp. 42-62.

himself Oscar Wells, a name that to people with a living media memory may bring immediate associations to the young Orson Welles who in 1938 created havoc in the USA with his live radio broadcast *The Invasion from Mars*. A few days later, Seth Warshavsky, managing director of the adult entertainment site Internet Entertainment Group, reveals on the firm's website that the upcoming event is pure fiction: it has been dreamt up by Ken Tipton, an inventive, young filmmaker who has written the screenplay himself and who will charge prospective net viewers five dollars just to watch the foreplay of the adventurous couple who were never meant to consummate their alleged love. Having provided technical assistance, the Internet Entertainment Group apparently backs down in furthering a virtual docudrama which, moreover, lacks a true ending.

The result: hackers invade the "www.ourfirsttime.com" site so that would-be viewers are informed about the fraud and are offered the young director's telephone number before being transferred to the Disney website. On a real press conference, Diane and Mike turn out to be two young actors with an acute wish for immediate stardom. Instead they have emulated Andy Warhol's credo by obtaining 15 minutes in the global limelight.¹

Seen in isolation this is a very banal event. But the context deserves further attention. The event is just one of many anecdotes about the Internet that have come into global circulation in recent years - often mediated by the Internet itself - and invoking strong emotions with experts and lay people alike. The computer in general and games and the Internet in particular serve as mental metaphors for discussing and debating wider social concerns. Thus, a self-professed "cyber psychologist" Kimberly Young in 1998 brought out a book *Caught in the Net* which was allegedly based on her counselling of more than 500 individuals all over the world addicted to surfing the net. The book is filled with gruesome stories of broken marriages, lost jobs and even suicides as results of net users' mental addictions that are termed "the dark sides" of the Internet.²

Similar stories regularly hit the headlines of newspapers and magazines. In the spring 1998, one woman in Cincinnati and another in Florida lose custody over their children in court because of their alleged Internet addiction, and a

¹Reported in *Berlingske Tidende* (29 July 1998).

²Kimberly Young, *Caught in the Net: How to Recognise the Signs of Internet Addiction - and a Winning Strategy for Recovery* (New York, John Wiley & Sons, 1998). The book and its results was widely publicized in popular papers and magazines, among them the Danish edition of *Illustrated Science*, XV (1998), pp. 36-37.

similar Danish case is reported on in the spring of 1999.³ Out of thousands of divorce proceedings, these particular cases hit the news because of their “newsworthiness” claims: by seemingly problematising Internet use, the cases wittingly or unwittingly address more general - but less newsworthy - issues about the proper definitions of good mothering and housewifery.

At the same time, the computer invokes other and equally strong metaphors: Al Gore has coined the captive phrase “the information super highway,” denoting ways in which computer technology will advance not only technical but, more importantly, economic and social growth - if one is among the strong contestants on the highway of course. For the metaphor equally invokes our fears of being left by the wayside or of not even be in a position to enter the race in the first place. In most (post)industrialised countries, spates of government reports, scholarly conferences and educational action programmes - not to mention commercial conventions, round tables and investments - have latched on to and acted on the superhighway metaphor as if it were a simple fact of reality. And then it does, indeed, become a reality.

The computer, then, conjures up strong feelings - positive as well as negative. The positive feelings are associated with the perceived rational aspects of computing - with its vast possibilities of storing, retrieving and processing data, with information search, education and global economic transactions. Conversely, negative feelings are associated with the perceived emotional aspects of computing - with games (particularly action games such as *Doom*, *Red Alert* and *Mortal Kombat*), with images of sex and violence on the Internet, and with “mere” chat groups.

The computer is the most recent, major media technology, and the rhetoric surrounding its social uses more than anything denotes that it is not one single medium but rather a hardware conglomerate for a wide range of diversified communication processes - from advanced art performances where computing is a hidden production tool, on to interactive 3D games and graphic design and to the more mundane tasks of information seeking and word processing. The Internet in particular highlights ways in which digital processes of communication harbour both entertainment and information, both public access and commercial gateways, both new public forums and new private concealments. Seen within a historical

³For example, in Denmark the cases from the USA was reported on by *Berlingske Tidende* (17 March 1998) under the headline: “Internet is addictive like narcotics”. In addition to offering other examples and quoting *Psychology Today* for statistical claims that one in nine Internet users in the USA is afflicted, the paper kindly offered its readers a few antidotes: the Internet address of a help line is given (www.computeraddiction.com) and a psychologist from Mental Health Net is quoted saying that surfing the Internet is no worse than reading books all day.

perspective the computer inherits basic traits from earlier media (print, visual and auditory media) while at the same time possessing the capacity to transform their modes of representation and interaction.

Not surprisingly, then, the computer discourse is a complex constellation of pros and cons which together condense two fundamental discursive approaches that have surfaced whenever new media have come to the fore in the past. These approaches have been termed the discourse of optimism and pessimism, respectively.⁴ It is significant that the discourse of optimism, voiced by proponents of the new medium in question, is primarily linked to aspects of mediation that may be associated with rationality, while the discourse of pessimism, voiced by critics of the very same medium in question, is linked to aspects of mediation that equally readily may be associated with emotionality. These dichotomies, being closely bound up with print and visual media respectively, are themselves lodged within fundamental dilemmas of modernity, as we shall see.

For every time a new mass medium has entered the social scene, it has spurred public debates on social and cultural norms, debates that serve to reflect, negotiate and possibly revise these very norms. By studying these public debates we may gain valuable insights into the ways in which media inventions are transformed into media technologies, i.e. processes whereby the media becomes lodged into existing social and cultural relations. Thereby, we construct a necessary analytical framework for attempting to understand and interpret how the media operate in society at large.

In some cases, debate of a new medium brings about - indeed changes into - heated, emotional reactions: in that case we have to do with what may be defined as a media panic. It may be considered a specification of the wider concept of moral panic, and it has some basic characteristics: the media is both instigator and purveyor of the discussion; the discussion is highly emotionally charged and morally polarised (the medium is either "good" or "bad") with the negative pole being the most visible in most cases; the discussion is an adult discussion that primarily focuses on children and young people; the proponents often have professional stakes in the subject under discussion as teachers, librarians, cultural critics or academic scholars; the discussion, like a classic narrative, has three phases: a beginning often catapulted by a single case, a peak involving some kind of public or professional intervention, and an end (or fading-out phase) denoting a seeming resolution to the perceived problems in question.

⁴Joli Jensen, *Redeeming Modernity: Contradictions in Media Criticism* (London, Sage, 1990).

By studying media panics we are offered a unique possibility to gain insight into the ways in which the media invoke and serve to reflect fundamental social and cultural problematics. The media panics, as will become clear in the following, may say less about the media than about basic social and cultural dilemmas inherent in modernity. But precisely by explicitly speaking about the media, panic proponents may tacitly address all the more effectively larger social and cultural concerns - if often unwittingly and only by projection. Panics in themselves do not serve to tackle, let alone, resolve these pertinent dilemmas. But, at least with hindsight, they may serve to alert us to their existence as a cause for action.

Panic studies

One of the first to chart the course of a public panic is the British sociologist Stanley Cohen. In 1972, he brought out *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*. Influenced by the micro-sociology of the Chicago School and notably Howard Becker's work on deviance, Cohen uses the conflicts in the early 1960s between the British youth groups Mods and Rockers to analyse how the mass media in general and the press in particular may create a negative group image that fuels back into public debate as stigma and back onto the self-image of the groups concerned as guidelines for further action. The police, teachers and social workers get involved and we have what Cohen defines as a moral panic. It is rooted in "conflicts of interests - at community and societal levels - and the presence of power differentials which leave some groups vulnerable to such attacks".⁵

Cohen's analysis is pertinent also to the issue of media panics for two reasons: he demonstrates how young people become symbols of larger social contradictions, and he analyses how these contradictions are basically power struggles. Moral panics, according to Cohen, serve as ideological safety valves whose effect it is to restore social equilibrium. These aspects are important to media panics, as we shall see. But because Cohen largely limits his sources to press clippings and similar media sources, it is difficult to gauge to what extent other

⁵Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (London, McGibbon & Kee, 1972), p. 198. Cohen, however, has not coined the phrase "moral panic". That honour goes to the visionary Canadian media scholar of one liners, Marshall McLuhan, who used the term in his book *Understanding Media: the Extensions of Man* (New York, McGraw-Hill, 1964). See Ulf Dahlquist, *Större vold end nöden kräver? Medieväldsdebatten i Sverige, 1980-1995* (Umeå, Boréa, 1998 - Ph D-dissertation), p. 46.

factors play a part in the panics: it seems as if the press itself orchestrates public opinion.

Other scholars, many of whom are influenced by Cohen's seminal study, have analysed specific moral panics or media panics. Within a British context, for example, studies have been made of the campaign against horror comics in the 1950s, the so-called video nasties in the 1980s and their underlying assumptions of media and childhood and youth. Similarly, within a Nordic context, extensive analyses have been conducted on the Swedish anti-Nick Carter campaign early in this century, on the fervent campaigns to curb young people's dance craze between the wars, and on the Swedish fear of young people's video uses in the 1980s - in addition to which come analyses offered in the context of the present issue.⁶ A few scholars have attempted to take a longer, historical perspective on the moral panics or media panics, a perspective that obviously loses the empirical depth and detail that may be found in studies of single panic "histories". What may be gained, however, is an insight into what is perhaps the most striking feature of the panics, namely their recurring patterns of evolvement and their surprisingly common forms of expression over time and across national borders.⁷ In the following, the focus is on *la longue durée* of media panics with an empirical focus on print vs visual media and a theoretical interest in unpacking the complex issues of recurrence and similarity in the panics.

"Poison of the Mind": Popular Fiction

In the history of mass communication, print media naturally offer the first examples of media panics. In 1795, when the French Revolution was a hotly

⁶Ulf Boethius, *När Nick Carter drevs på flykten* (Stockholm, Gidlunds förlag, 1989); Jonas Frykman, *Dansbaneeländet: ungdomen, populärkulturen och opinionen* (Stockholm, Natur och Kultur, 1988); Ulf Dahlquist, *Större vold än nöden kräver? Medievåldsdebatten i Sverige, 1980-1995* (Umeå, Boréa Bokförlag, 1998 - Ph D-dissertation); Martin Barker, *A Haunt of Fears: the Strange History of the British Horror Comics Campaign* (London, Sydney, Pluto Press, 1984); Martin Barker & Julian Petley (Eds), *Ill Effects: the Media/Violence Debate* (London, Routledge, 1977).

⁷Mark West, *Children, Culture and Controversy* (Hamden, CT, 1988); Magnus Knutsson, "Serieeländet, dansbaneeländet och de andra eländena: ungdom, populärkultur och moralpanik," in Helena Wulff (Ed.), *Ungdom och medier: klass, kommersialism och kreativitet* (Stockholm, Centrum för masskommunikationsforskning, 1989), pp. 5-39; Kirsten Drotner, "Modernity and Media Panics"; John Springhall, *Youth, Popular Culture and Moral Panics: Penny Gaffs to Gangsta-Rap* (New York, St. Martin's Press, 1998).

contested social issue all over Europe, a group of evangelical philanthropists in Britain launched a zealous campaign against what they termed "the poison continually flowing thro' the channel of vulgar and licentious publications".⁸ As an antidote, the group started to publish a series of so-called cheap repository tracts. These were strongly didactical religious tales and songs that were decked out as traditional ballads and broadsides with their coarse paper, crude woodcuts and bad print. The tracts were often given away as prizes in the newly established Sunday schools and other places of moral reform. Traditional popular fiction, the emotionally charged and politically subversive tales, should be beaten by serious moral edification that soon included religious magazines as well.⁹

This example demonstrates two important aspects of media panics: first, they are no simple side effects of commercial mass production or technological innovation. Britain may offer the earliest examples of media panics leading directly to cultural counteraction simply because very early on literary production, both entertaining and educative, is highly developed here: after all Britain is the first industrialised and urbanised country in the world. But around the same time, we find concerned educationalists in Germany, such as Friedrich Gedike, warning against an enormous growth in juvenile literature whose mental nourishment, he said, is like "unwholesome and insipid fruit".¹⁰ By the end of the 18th century, several of the "rewarding" British magazines were translated and brought out in a mostly rural Denmark - among them is *Aftenlæsning i Familie-Kredse eller Magazin for Ungdommen* [...] (*efter det engelske*) (1796) which advocated educative, silent reading for those in a position to be able to afford candle lights.¹¹

Second, panics are deeply politically implicated in issues beyond their immediate causes that in this case seemed to be the popularity of ballads, broadsheets and chapbooks. Literacy means access to Bible-reading and religious studies that any right-minded bourgeois man would endorse. But literacy may equally further studies of Tom Paine's radical pamphlet *The Rights of Man* or

⁸Victor E. Neuburg, *Popular Literature: a History and Guide* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1977), p. 255.

⁹See chapters 2-4 in Kirsten Drotner, *English Children and Their Magazines, 1751-1945* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1988; Orig. 1985).

¹⁰Friedrich Gedike (1787) *Einige Gedanken über Schulbücher und Kinderschriften*, quoted in Lars Furuland & Mary Ørvig, *Utblick över barn- och ungdomslitteraturen: debatt och analys* Stockholm, Rabén & Sjögren, 1986), pp. 250-251. See also Rudolf Schenda, *Volke ohne Buch: Studien zur Sozialgeschichte der populären Lesestoffe, 1770-1910* (München, Taschenbuch Verlag, 1977; Orig. 1970), pp. 73-85 and 93-107.

¹¹See Martin Zerlang, "Folkkelige fortællinger," in Ulrik Lehrmann (Ed.), *Dansk Mediehistorie*, vol. 1 (Copenhagen, Samleren; Main ed. Klaus B. Jensen, 1996), pp. 29-68.

thrilling tales of the popular literary fare. In a developing capitalist society like Britain, the spreading of general qualifications such as literacy was an economic asset while the regulation of these qualifications was a political liability. Economic and social modernisation highlights the contradictions of democratisation vs control inherent in any media development, and the French Revolution threw these contradictions into sharp political relief. All later media panics are based on such political, social and cultural discourses of power. But the strategies employed change.

In Denmark, popular print media were regularly issues of public discussion and concern from the 1840s on. In the 1870s, the combined processes of urbanisation, industrialisation and an active labour movement condensed into what was labelled "*Samfundsopgave*"-debatten (the "Societal Task" debate) which is the first Danish hint of a media panic. Significantly, the debate was sparked off by the fast-growing circulation of serial publications, almanacs and ballads. But it quickly turned into a question about the general character formation of the common man (and progressively women and children, too), a question that is encompassed by the Enlightenment concept of *dannelse* (in German: *Bildung*). It is a crucial term in the development of modernity, as we shall see, and a cornerstone of Nordic and German cultural politics to this day in the form of *folkeoplysning*, or general learning (as opposed to education for specific competences).

Under the heading "Populair Lektüre" (Popular Reading-Matter), Otto Borchsenius, the editor of the educative magazine *Nær og Fjern* in 1874 started a series of articles about "the common man's reading" whose arguments resonate widely in newspapers and journals. According to the editor, popular reading "has ceased to claim a mere literary interest, it has attained practical significance in times when the fourth and even fifth estate shoot their roots towards the surface of social and political life, and when, consequently, general learning (*Folkeoplysningen*) - if only for reasons of survival - has become our most important item on the social agenda."

Borchsenius' cause for concern is "the literary deluge" found on his "travels to and raids into [...] the pedlars' caves and habitations of trash literature". Realizing that general character formation had not reached the poor, he proclaimed that "it is the duty of the educated classes to secure that even the scum of the people may drink from unpolluted water now that their thirst has grown. Like his British forbears, Borchsenius' remedy was educative literature in an eye-catching format: "learning the lessons of our fiends to sneak in the backdoor when one has

been thrown out of the frontdoor".¹² A few people voiced different causes and remedies. Thus, the working-class newspaper the *Socialdemokraten* (the Social Democrat) claimed that poor and over-religious education of poor children were the real causes for concern. And in the libertarian journal *Det nittende Århundrede* (the Nineteenth Century), the literary historian Vilhelm Møller warned middle-class critics against upholding their own literary norms as universal criteria of quality. On the contrary, he said, reading in and of itself is the true gift given to humanity.¹³

These early examples of panics over popular literature culled from Britain, Germany and Denmark point to recurring themes in all panics, namely the questions of general character formation of groups of people other than the writers' own - and obstacles to that - combined with the aims and means of cultural politics. As we have seen, children and young people were important objects of concern from the outset, but they were often defined in terms of class - as part of the "mob" seduced into delinquency and depravity by their choice of reading. But from the end of the 19th century on, this social definition of the young increasingly change into a definition based on age.

In tandem with growing industrialisation, urbanisation and organisational power, the majority of the labour movement was integrated into a social-democratic "long march through the institutions". Conversely, children and then young people gradually and erratically lost their economic and social independence as important contributors to the family economy. Instead, their newfangled status as pupils yielded the beginnings of a cultural, and perhaps even psychological, autonomy: a little leisure time and spending money were enough to enjoy inexpensive toys and sweets, popular magazines, film and music - all tangible signs of a modicum of independence that were recognised by children and adults alike, if with different implications. Even working-class and peasant children begin to be defined by age and generation as has been the case for middle-class children since the end of the 18th century.¹⁴ The title of Swedish Ellen Key's *The Century of the*

¹²Quoted in Otto Borchsenius' collection of articles from *Nær og Fjern* (1877) *En Samfundsopgave: Nær og Fjernes Artikler om Folkeoplysning* (Copenhagen, C. A. Reitzel & Otto B. Wroblewskys Forlag), pp. 2, 39.

¹³Gunhild Agger, "Litteraturens typer," in Lehrmann (Ed.), *Danske mediehistorie*, vol. 1, pp. 131-132.

¹⁴On the transition from a social to an age concept of childhood, see, for example, James Walvin, *A Child's World* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1982); Kirsten Drotner, *English Children and Their Magazines, 1751-1945* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1988; Orig. 1985); Ning de Coninck-Smith, "The Struggle for the Child's Time - at All Times: School and Children's Work in Town and Country in Denmark from 1900 to the 1960s," in Ning de Coninck-Smith et al. (Eds) *Industrious Children: Work and Childhood in the*

Child (1900) is a symbolic mark that in our century the upbringing of all children becomes objects of adult interest, control and sincere concern.

As the costs of modernisation - poor housing, ill-health and insecure circumstances of living - become apparent in the USA and in European countries other than Britain, middle-class people's concern over the upbringing of the young increasingly sought remedies in fledging new sciences such as psychology or in art which is seen as a direct route to a higher form of existence. Thus, Stanley Hall's book *Adolescence* (1904) is rightly claimed as a cornerstone in the modern definition of youth as an essentially psychological age phase of tension and susceptibility at the threshold to adulthood, a phase, therefore, that adults have to carefully watch over and guide through.

In Germany, the teacher Heinrich Wolgast published *Das Elend Unserer Jugendliteratur: ein Beitrag zur künstlerische Erziehung* (1896). In this widely influential book (it appeared in its 7th edition in 1950), Wolgast claimed that modernisation's only redemption is that it brings about new aesthetic potentials: especially children's appreciation of proper books may create a wholeness of being that is undermined in other areas of life. Wolgast was important in the contemporary German reform movement of aesthetic education that explicitly sought to counteract the ill-effects of modernisation through an elevation of cultural taste, and his book spurred the formation of a literary movement whose participants put up an earnest struggle against the so-called "unworthy literature" (*unwertige Literatur*). Wolgast's organicist ideas were later transplanted into for example Sweden.

Here, prompted by the huge popularity of penny journals such as *Nick Carter* the well-known author and teacher Marie Louise Gagner became a main advocate of giving, as she said in 1909, "our youth good literature; then it will be less tempted to illicit acquisitions of the bad variety".¹⁵ Denmark, too, had its own short-lived anti-Carter campaign as it evidenced elsewhere in this issue. One of Gagner's Danish parallels is Niels K. Kristensen, a teacher from Copenhagen, whose express aim it was to offer his own prolific writings as superior alternatives to the periodicals. As a prolific contributor to the journal *Vor Ungdom* - a major influence on Danish educational debate early in this century - he warned against "bad newspaper instalments [Avisfeuilletoner] and serial novels" and "two-penny [2-Ores] weeklies that speculate in crime and debauchery". In Kristensen's view the young readers' "taste is corrupted and their feelings are brutalised [...]" Poison

Nordic Countries, 1850-1990 (Odense, Odense University Press, 1997) pp. 129-159.

¹⁵Marie Louise Gagner, "Våra barns nöjesläsning och kolportärlitteraturen," quoted in Lars Furuland & Mary Ørvig, *Utblick över barn- och ungdomslitteraturen: debatt och analys* (Stockholm, Rabén & Sjögren, 1909), p. 256.

cannot be sold without due certification from a priest or doctor, but poison of the mind is readily sold at two penny in the cornershops of any ally". Like Wolgast and Gagner, Kristensen advocated his own literary norms as antidotes rather than direct censorship of the serial publications. By being introduced to "planned and selective leisure reading [children] around the age of 14 may reach the cultural level of an adult".¹⁶

The various strategies of using a perceived universal norm of "quality" culture as a means of moral, and by implication social, elevation forms a stable element in media panics through this century. The concept of social elevation through moral edification originates in the bourgeois ideas of *dannelse* or general character formation, as we shall see. But it resonates widely with working-class groups and it becomes absolutely central to the cultural policies of *folkeoplysning* (general learning) promoted by cooperative movements and social democrats in Scandinavia as elsewhere. In Denmark, this approach to culture has routinely been explained as a direct result of the Danish priest and author Grundtvig's organicist ideas about the people and the subsequent creation of high-schools of general education (*folkehøjskoler*) from the 1850s on.

But seen within a broader historical perspective of culture that includes popular forms of representation, the strong tradition of general character formation and general learning may be analysed as a reaction against the upsurge of popular forms of culture in general and commercial media, such as serials, weeklies and film, in particular. For example, it is no coincidence that the first time children are mentioned in any Danish cultural legislation is in a library act in the 1930s. Public libraries become cornerstones in the inter-war attempts of extending Culture to the people.

In wider terms of cultural politics, the foundation of radio and later television as so-called public-service institutions is entirely in accordance with the ideas of general learning. John Reith, legendary first director of the BBC, professed that the aim of public service should be to "inform, educate and entertain" with programming having a decisive focus on the first two aspects well into the 1970s.

In general, the panics through this century become institutionalised as various interest groups, political parties and professional societies are progressively accepted as the legitimate voices of public debate. For example, the social democrats' youth organisation, *Socialdemokratisk Ungdom*, was among the groups carrying on a fervent fight against pulp literature between the wars, but it was an

¹⁶Niels K. Kristensen, "Morskabslæsning som Opdragelsesmiddel for Børn," in R. C. Mortensen (Ed.), *Det pædagogiske Selskabs Aarsberetning 1902-03* [Printed together with *Vor Ungdom*] (Copenhagen, Nielsen & Lydiche, 1903), p. 24.

uphill struggle. In 1936, various religious and political groups through the Ministry of Justice urged the police to confiscate what was termed pornographic and illicit material, they succeeded in having a few weeklies banned and they propagated information about public libraries. But the success was short-lived. It needed the ideological warfare of the Second World War to recreate a successful literary panic.¹⁷ The result of this is seen in the various comics campaigns of the 1950s whose history is rather well-researched. But by that time, new popular media vied for adult attention as potential threats to the young.

Film: "A Prostitute and Contaminator"

The major media that reach a wide circulation in our century primarily apply visual and/or auditory forms of expression - from film, radio, and records promoting dance music and jazz unto television, videos and the computer (which also serves to reinforce print as noted in the introduction). Unlike popular literature, these new media do not share their means of expression with the print media blue-printed as art (i.e. the book) or information (i.e. the serious newspaper). The abilities to listen, watch and move rhythmically can be developed beyond the confines of formal training - and they are.¹⁸

Moreover, mediated images and sounds in many ways share the formal properties found in non-mediated forms of representation: when we decode a film image of a house, for example, we apply competencies of recognition already nurtured in real life: there are walls, windows and doors, so it must be a house. These formal traits of the new popular media clearly serve to complicate any public debate over their relative merits, since the panic discourse, as already mentioned, is basically a discourse of power whose stakes are the right to define cultural norms and social qualifications. Such a discourse is clearly complicated when the new media demand and nurture competencies that cannot be controlled institutionally like reading. Such differences between print, visual and auditive media naturally influence the panics over them.

From the onset, film is a true mass medium in that it attracts wide sections of the population wherever it appears, with children and young people making up

¹⁷Carl Erik Bay, *Socialdemokratiets stilling i den ideologiske debat i mellemkrigstiden* (Grenå, GMT, 1973), pp. 213-222; "Foreword" in Georg V. Bengtsson, *Ungdommen og litteraturen* (Odense, A.C. Normanns Forlag, 1944); Bent Fausing, *Danmarksbilleder i massekulturen, 1944-1946* (Copenhagen, Gyldendal, 1981), pp. 144-165.

¹⁸Raymond Williams, *Culture* (Glasgow, Fontana, 1981), p. 94.

a sizeable part, and at times a majority, of audiences. Perhaps the first systematic study of film audiences was performed by German Emilie Altenloh in the town of Mannheim and published in her book *Zur Soziologie des Kino* (1914). She found a varied audience composition many of whom were children and young people. In Britain, immediately after World War I juveniles made up about 30 per cent of the cinema audiences, and in 1939 the renowned sociologist Seeborn Rowntree in his comprehensive study of York stated that more than half of the cinema audiences were made up of children and young people, and amongst adults 75 per cent were women.¹⁹

The cinemas are public places and their attractions visibly publicised on posters and bill-boards - characteristics that quickly made them objects of an age-old debate over the possible regulation of juveniles' use of public spaces. Moreover, because of the "reality effect" of visual forms of representation, film, photographs and later television, video and digital images are prone to be judged by their resemblance to external reality: realism becomes a general norm of evaluation, and that has two decisive consequences for youthful reception: first, the question of imitation is put with renewed force by concerned adults: will susceptible viewers imitate in real life what they see on the screen? Second, non-realist forms of representation are regarded as the most dangerous, i.e. fiction and particularly violence and sex.²⁰

A hierarchy of representational dangers is thus set up: most innocent is print media without pictures, then comes print media with many pictures such as cartoons, then follows realist film and finally non-realist film portraying the non-everyday like sex and violence. For example, the psychiatrist Frederick Wertham in his (in)famous attack on comic books in the USA *The Seduction of the Innocent* from 1953 claimed that the comics are "a debasement of the old institution of printing, the corruption of the art of drawing and almost an abolition of literary writing."²¹ This hierarchy must furthermore be understood and interpreted within

¹⁹Sir Asa Briggs, *Mass Entertainment: the Origins of A Modern Industry* (Adelaide, Griffin, 1960), p. 18; Jeffrey Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace: Cinema and Society in Britain, 1930-1939* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 13.

²⁰For a cogent analysis of effects theory in media studies as an academic legacy of this common-sense reasoning, see Graham Murdock, "Reservoirs of Dogma," in Martin Barker & Julian Petley (Eds), *Ill Effects: The Media/Violence Debate* (London, Routledge, 1997), pp. 67-86.

²¹Frederic Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent* (New York, Rinehart, 1953), p. 381. For a solid study of Wertham's anti-comics campaign, see James Gilbert, *A Cycle of Outrage: America's Reaction to the Juvenile Delinquent in the 1950s* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1986).

the general conceptual framework, mentioned in the beginning of this article, within which rationality ranks as the most desirable state of mind and, consequently, emotionality is thought of as the opposition to rationality and hence as a possible threat to one's personal well-being. So, sex and violence are considered dangerous by many adults not least because they are seen as inducing stark emotions that serve to undermine the individual's very humanity, a process that, following that line of reasoning, is particularly likely to occur during the vulnerable ages of childhood and youth.

Not surprising, then, most countries saw heated debates over the influence of film on the young including the legal issue of censorship.²² And as was the case with popular literature, proponents were in the minority. Calling film "the working man's [sic] university", a "theatre of democracy" and "the Esperanto of the eye",²³ they argued for film in the name of art or democracy thereby tacitly assuming a dichotomy between high and low culture and between democracy and barbarism.

One of the best-known Danish proponents of film was Emma Gad, Denmark's first female journalist, socialite dramatist, friend of the then internationally renowned author Edward Brandes and mother of Urban Gad who directed *Afgrunden* (1910), the Danish erotic melodrama that catapulted Danish silent film into international success and Asta Nielsen into immediate stardom. In 1913 Mrs Gad attended a public debate in *Studentereforeningen* (the students' society) in Copenhagen on "moving pictures, their origin, their right of existence and their future". Subsequently, she wrote a much debated essay in the liberal newspaper *Politiken* defending film against the majority of participants at the meeting - authors, politicians and teachers: "A headmaster, who is also a film censor in a neighboring borough proffered in a detailed speech that over the last year he had seen more 8,000 films or was it 16 or 12,000 and he had come to the result that the cinema, seen from an educational point of view, implies great dangers - the

²²A detailed discussion of the contradictory Danish debate as a sign of dilemmas in defining children and young people is offered by Ning de Coninck-Smith, "He Wished Them Nothing But Good, but Knew that Many Had Been Harmed by It: Film Censorship in Denmark, 1896-1922," in Jorgen Povlsen, Signe Mellengaard & Ning de Coninck-Smith (Eds.), *Childhood - Old Age: Equals or Opposites?* (Odense, Odense University Press), pp. 31-54.

²³See Lewis Jacobs, *The Rise of American Film: a Critical History* (New York, Teachers College Press, 1968; Orig. 1939); Garth Jowett, *Film: the Democratic Art* (Boston, Little, Brown & Co, 1976).

youthful imaginations - the sensational effect, etc. - how we know it.”²⁴ And one certainly does recognise a now familiar pattern. Religious groups rose in protest against the perceived dangers of the dark that might lead to erotic experiments - and not just on the screen. Thus, in 1909 Johanne Blom, a pietist school teacher and member of the Copenhagen borough council, advocated for “a prohibition against the pitch darkness at intermissions in the cinemas”, a plea that met with little success, however, and made Ms Blom the laughing-stock of cinema owners and distributors.²⁵ More resonance was made in assertions of imitation as the following quote from 1912 culled from the journal *Forældre og Børn: Organ for kristelig Forening for Opdragelse i Hjem og Skole* [Parents and Children: Organ of the Christian Society for Upbringing in Home and School]: “... So the “Nick Carter” literature has returned to us in the form of moving pictures in the Kosmorama. And the evil influence is so much greater than with the reading of the [Nick Carter] books because the sight of images is so much starker, more immediate and direct than reading the books, and hence leaves a more indelible impression on young minds. It is not unusual that the police on the arrest of young criminals get the confession that they got the idea of the crime from a cinema performance.”²⁶ As is evident, an imitation as well as a reality effect is surmised here, just as one panic serves to reinforce another - a reinforcement that seems evidence enough of the truth value of the statement.

After World War I, imported films, especially from the USA, took over most Danish cinema screens - in 1922, 95 per cent of all films shown in Denmark were imported, 85 per cent from the USA.²⁷ This development made conservatives in Denmark express their concerns over the future of “Danishness”. With them the fear of film was associated with a question of national identity. Conversely, liberal and socialist grouping focussed on the perceived ideological effects of Hollywood, not least when economic and social crisis hit most industrialised countries in the 1930s. Thus, a young communist and author, Broby-Johansen in 1935 clamoured that “the American finance capital made film a prostitute and contaminator at large”.²⁸ With these groups, the concern over film was coupled to

²⁴Kirsten Drotner, “Panik i medierne,” in Gunhild Agger & Kirsten Drotner (Eds), *Dansk mediehistorie, vol. 2: 1880-1960* (Copenhagen, Samleren; Main ed. Klaus B. Jensen, 1997), p. 159.

²⁵Quoted in Ning de Coninck-Smith, “He Wished Nothing But Good”.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Torben Grodal, “Levende billeder til alle,” in Agger & Drotner, *Dansk mediehistorie, vol. 2*, p. 220.

²⁸Rudolf Broby-Johansen, “Den kapitalistiske Film: en aandelig Pest, eller Filmens Forbandelse, Fomedrelse og Opstandelse,” *Arbejderbladet*, XXXI (1935), p. 8.

wider concerns of Americanisation and ideological seduction. In the fear of the USA, an opposition against capitalism and national pride was condensed into a forceful image that resonated in other European countries with different accents.²⁹

In Britain for example, the first enquiry into film was set up in 1917 by the National Council of Public Morals. Its report, *The Cinema in Education* (1925), far from validates the accusations. Thus, the commission stated in its conclusion: "it certainly has not been proved that the increase in juvenile crime generally has been consequent on the cinema, or has been independent of other factors more conducive to wrongdoing."³⁰ Nevertheless, the allegations of delinquency continued unabated.

As Hollywood gained superiority as the international film industry, the panics over film were increasingly inflected by nationalist, even racist, overtones. In Britain, perhaps the most extreme example of this is *The Devil's Camera*, written in 1932 by two journalists, R.G. Burnett and E.D. Martell. The authors objected to the cinemas' "sex-mad and cynical financiers" who were identified as "mainly Jewish". They went on to profess: "It is unimaginably tragic that at [this] time the cinemas should be revelling in squandermania, promiscuity, crime and idleness. Our national strength is being sapped, our capacity to triumph over adversity undermined."³¹

In German film panics, the nationalist overtones were coupled with a more direct anti-Americanism. The dual development of rapid modernisation and inflation after World War I impoverished the academic and administrative middle classes as well as many self-employed people. As the cultural elite lost its social stronghold, its opposition to new cultural artifacts intensified. A well-known film critic, Herbert Jhering, writing in 1926, is typical of the response: "The number of people who see films and never read books is in the millions. They are all co-opted by American taste; they are made equal, made uniform ... The American film is the new world militarism approaching. It's more dangerous than Prussian militarism.

²⁹ A similar anti-Americanism is also seen in the British panic over the so-called horror comics in the 1950s. See Martin Barker, *A Haunt of Fears: the Strange History of the British Horror Comics Campaign* (London-Sydney: Pluto Press, 1984). Still, at times the USA has also served as a powerful metaphor of optimism and hope, as is the case in many European countries immediately after World War II. For an analysis of the situation in Denmark, see Peter Knoop Christensen et al. (Eds), *Amerikanisering af det danske kulturliv i perioden 1945-1958* (Aalborg: Aalborg University Press, 1983); Søren Schou, "True love," in Agger & Drotner, *Dansk mediehistorie*, vol. 2, pp. 308-324.

³⁰ Jeffrey Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace: Cinema and Society in Britain, 1930-1939* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 71.

³¹ Ibid., pp. 55-56.

It doesn't devour individuals, it devours masses."³² With a curious historical irony given the contemporary strengthening of the Nazi movement, film is linked here with seduction of the masses. Crucially, this "fear of the mob" was projected onto the USA as the combined embodiment of industrialisation and commodification. This projection only makes sense if it is acknowledged that media panics speak forcefully about other issues than are immediately apparent.

"A Communal Softening of the Brain": Common Assumptions

As the century progressed new media entered the social scene and became foci of often highly emotional public debates: the anti-comics' and anti-rock 'n' roll campaigns in the 1950s, concern over children watching television in the 1960s, the forceful attacks on the so-called video nasties in the 1980s and - most recently - the fear of aspects of the computer and the Internet, as already noted. There have been other important moral panics whose focus has not been on the media. But as new mass media have come to the fore with an ever-increasing rapidity, more and more moral panics have been media panics or have quickly been implicated with concern over the media.

In media panics, the public discourse has changed over the years from what may be called a pessimist elitism towards a more optimistic pluralism. The emphasis in the early panics on censorship and direct social regulation of the masses in general and the young in particular, gradually gives way to more tacit paternalistic measures that promote good examples of culture as means of moral elevation. In recent years, this norm of moral elevation has been challenged, too, by an ideal of democratic choice: children know cultural quality when they see it. This view is now even turned into a consumerist ideal by advertisers who routinely defend unlimited media commercials in or around children's programmes with reference to children's critical abilities.

The historical development of the panics from elitism to pluralism is paralleled within cultural politics by a move away from democratising Culture towards increased cultural democratisation. Unquestioned cultural elitism has indeed been somewhat undermined in both cultural criticism and cultural politics. Democracy has undoubtedly gained by this process. An important catalyst to the changes in public as well as political discourse has been the mediation of everyday culture through this century, and especially the nearly universal distribution of

³²Quoted p. 21 in Anton Kaes, "The Debate about Cinema: Charting a Controversy (1909-29)," *New German Critique*, XL (1987), pp. 7-33.

television: potentially all family members have shared similar symbolic repertoires thereby serving to reinforce the cultural autonomy of the young.³³

Apart from the changes over time, the panics illustrate important internal contradictions at various historical moments: between political and religious groups, between cultural conservatives and cultural liberals - not to mention what shifts occur within the overall majority whose voices are never heard in the panics. These contradictions influence public strategies of for example censorship and education as well as the cultural spaces left for the young at any given time. Still, the similarities of the panics tend to overshadow their differences. All panics are united by a firm belief in rational argumentation: if people only know about the dangers of the media, if only their tastes are elevated, or if the media mechanisms are properly revealed, then they will change their cultural preferences.

But this belief is facilitated by, indeed founded on, an intrinsic historical amnesia. Every new panic develops as if it was the first time such issues were debated in public, and yet the debates are strikingly similar. This amnesia is closely related to another common characteristic of the panics: their historical incorporation. The intense preoccupation with the latest media fad, immediately relegates older media to the shadows of acceptance. Thus, the trends towards cultural democratisation are chiefly seen with media that we have grown accustomed to, media that have proved their innocence, so to speak. So, today comics can be hailed in safety: Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck were appropriated by pop artists such as Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol in the 1960s, the ICA in London and other renowned museums went on to promote cultural cross-overs as gallery pieces, and even the comic figure Tin-Tin now has his own museum. But the new media, such as home videos in the 1980s and in the 1990s action-games on cd-rom, still conjure up anxieties that are very similar to those expressed over periodicals a hundred years ago.

Crucially, these similarities are rooted in three basic assumptions underlying all panics. The first of these assumptions is concerned with culture. Apart from the book and the serious newspaper (with few pictures), the media are bracketed as part of popular culture, they are defined in opposition to high culture or art, and they are found wanting. The dichotomy of high and low culture is defined as a hierarchy of values. Some familiar oppositions are usually associated

³³See Joshua Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behaviour* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1985). Naturally, this sharing of cultural repertoires may also cross borders of social class, ethnicity and nationality all of which does not, however, necessarily imply the shaping of a universal media culture, since the contexts of reception are still widely different.

with this dichotomy: art vs entertainment, innovation vs tradition, authenticity vs imitation, distanciation vs involvement, rationalism vs emotionalism, critique vs acceptance. In this list of associations, we begin by an opposition between artifacts based on formal differences of production (the individual artistic *oeuvre* vs the mass-produced media output), but we end up with an opposition between people based on their different modes of reception (critical insight gained by book reading vs useless daydreaming in front of the box). Thus, the cultural hierarchy based on differences of production, almost imperceptively turns into a social and psychological distinction of use.

That the media have an immediate impact is part of the second general assumption that deals with social psychology. Most stage-managers of media panics offer very simplified notions of what is involved in cultural interpretation. Following this, media experience and social action are directly linked: if we see violence on the screen, we become criminals. Or, according to others, if we are exposed to media violence, our senses are dulled so that we accept a higher degree of 'real' violence: in both cases the focus is on the effect of what the media do to people - not what people do with the media. While panics well into the 20th century emphasise the social evils resulting from popular culture including the media, today media opposition centres on the psychological ill-effects. Arguments are being internalised as the media penetrate deeper into our social lives.

The theoretical refinement of people's engagement with various media representations - from uses-and-gratifications and reception studies to feminist criticism and deconstruction - that have marked media research over the last 15 years, does not seem to revoke these traditional ideas of behaviourism. Part of the reason for this may be that the more recent theories do not readily lend themselves to quantitative, deductive investigation that seem to be the "evidence" unquestioningly accepted by journalists, and few of the theories are sensitive to psychological development. Moreover, the methodological difficulties involved in empirical studies are in inverse proportion to the age of the recipients. But just as likely is it that panics feed on the extremes and hence cannot bear nuancing.

Children and young people are continuously defined as objects - and often vulnerable victims - in the panics. This leads to the third assumption that deals with the relation between culture and social psychology. According to this assumption, cultural development and human development are aspects of one and the same process. Children's cultural edification is part of, indeed proof of, their social elevation. Therefore their cultural fare must be guarded, watched over and protected because its composition is vital for their mental growth. Following this logic, if adults watch *Oprah Winfrey* or *Melrose Place* every week, then their humaneness is gradually undermined. But if children watch the same programmes every week, then they never even get a chance to develop this humaneness. Culture

is seen as a civilizing force for better or worse. In 1930, the Danish author Gunnar Gunnarsson cogently expressed this type of reasoning: "Particularly for children a natural and unalloyed use of books is useful, indeed necessary. A child growing up without such experiences will hardly become the human being it could become..."³⁴ And John Buchan, director of British Instructional Films between the wars and a professed advocate of film, declared in the British Parliament: "The really vicious film is not very common; it is very rare. What we have to complain of much more is silliness and vulgarity ... vulgarity may be a real danger, if it results in a general degradation of the public taste and a communal softening of the brain."³⁵ Cultural and mental development, according to this belief, are two sides of the same coin. The coin is called general character formation. As we have seen, this concept lies at the core of the emphasis that all media panics put upon rational argumentation and the prioritising of informative media contents, just as it is a cornerstone of dominant cultural policies with liberals as well as social democrats. Historically, this fusion of cultural and mental development is shaped by the fundamental importance played by general character formation in the development of modernity.

Modernisation is a dynamic process founded on a capitalist competition for profit. The economic and social upheavals of secularisation, industrialisation and urbanisation have as their corollary profound transformations of cultural symbols, experiences and expressions, transformations that together may be termed modernity. Some traditions and qualifications are rendered obsolete, others become increasingly important, and people are constantly engaged in interpreting this complex constellation of continuity and change. While actual experiences naturally vary according to age and gender, ethnicity and region, everybody must learn the fundamental lesson of modernity: to live with the possibility of social, cultural, and psychological change - to face the possibility of difference from others and from previous manners and mores. Modernity fosters individuality as a social norm.

Now, how can we all develop an individuality that at the same time is socially determined? Obviously we cannot. Modernity is founded on a paradox of sameness and difference.³⁶ Paradoxes cannot be resolved, but their contradictions

³⁴Gunnar Gunnarsson, "Om bogen og barnet," quoted in Carsten Frederiksen (Ed.) *Den hellige skrift: en bog om bøger og billedmedier* (Valby, Danmarks Biblioteksforenings Forlag, 1989; Orig. 1930), p. 190.

³⁵Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace*, p. 54.

³⁶In philosophical terms, this is the dilemma of universalism vs particularism, a dilemma that feminist analyses of otherness have been among the most profound to tackle theoretically since Simone de Beauvoir's *Le deuxième sexe* (1949).

may be tackled and possibly mediated. Modernity facilitates the creation of difference (gendered individuality), while at the same time it nurtures the common ramifications of difference (the social norm). The term nurture is important. For the inherent contradictions of the paradox are negotiated through a general formation of character. Human life can be formed, it is not given by God or fate. Hence, upbringing is seen as the locus of character formation, and childhood is defined in terms of development: the child can and must develop - i.e. be brought up to the norms governing adult life (this often equals middle-class norms, as we have seen).

So, cultural and human development become equivalent in the dominant discourse of modernity. They are united by a shared opposition to what is normatively excluded as barbarism and lack of culture. A main result of this opposition is the hierarchy of taste as expressed in the dichotomy of art (= good) and entertainment (= bad), the latter being further subdivided into print (= better) and images (= worse). Within this discursive context, it is understandable why pedagogical and cultural debates become so important in modernity and why they are often conflated as in the case of media panics.

Through the panics, adults seek to redefine the parameters of character formation, parameters that are shaken and possibly undermined by the advent of every new mass medium: what do our children need? What should be the norms of a good life? How can we accommodate these aims to new cultural developments (and vice versa)? Because these questions are fundamental to our everyday interpretation of modernity, they resonate widely across the social scale uniting teachers, politicians and parents around common cultural aims despite important differences of the means employed. Through the panics, people attempt to overcome the paradox of modernity which, however, cannot be "overcome". And so the panic activists continue their Sisyphean struggle.

The Dark Side of the Moon: Underlying Reasons

In modernity, children and young people have continuously occupied a pioneering cultural position. The formation of modern childhood and youth, in which new generations are raised within the parameters of family and school, coincides with an unprecedented commodification of culture. As children and later adolescents lose social and economic power in the world of work, they gain cultural power in the world of commercial leisure. From the mid-nineteenth century on, the young are unrivalled consumers of weeklies, and from the infancy of film in the 1900s, they constitute a major film audience as we saw. That many commercial media are fundamentally, if not exclusively, young media is a fact that

often escapes researchers of popular culture. Here, the discussion is generally limited to a social discussion of elitist art vs the entertainment of the masses or a gendered discussion of male vs female cultural preferences and uses. But the youthfulness of the media public has not escaped adult attention in public debate. Indeed, it is the very fuel propelling the panics.

For the social claims and cultural competencies that the young often gain as spin-offs of their media use pose a potential threat to existing power relations in social as well as in cultural and psychological terms. Furthermore, many of these competencies become very visible to the public eye. Thus, film-going, visits to discos and attending concerts are social events that all imply a youthful occupation of public space, today as before.

Media contents often emphasise emotional involvement and bodily expressiveness and experimentation. This hedonistic letting go is in tune with the promises of consumption but is sharply opposed to the norms governing employment and school relations. The media uses of the young perspectivise with particular clarity contradictions that are intrinsic to modernity itself. These contradictions are defined and confined as "problems" within the dominant Enlightenment discourse of general character formation.

On a social level, media panics basically attempt to reestablish a generational status quo that the youthful pioneers seem to undermine. This tacit generational struggle is demonstrated in the adult strategy of externalising the problem: it is *the young* and their media uses that are targeted as evils. Nowhere is this more evident than in the panics over violence: while a single splatter movie may harm an adolescent for life, any number of killings are tolerated on television news (these are facts) or in ordinary gangster movies (these are fads). And the recurrent headlines warning against juveniles' Internet chatting has yet to be matched by similar warnings against adults' net-trading of bonds and shares.

The generational struggle is reinforced by what may be termed "the first-time effect": what is experienced for the first time in childhood and youth often stands out and is coloured by a special aura of reminiscence in whose shade later experiences of the same kind seem to pale.³⁷ It adds to the credence of Marshall McLuhan's well-known credo that new media build on and are understood in terms of old media when the first-time effect is taken into account: perhaps it is not only mummy's dinners that taste the best, it is also the media, experienced for the first time in one's own youth that remains bases of evaluation in later life? If

³⁷See Geoffrey Pearson, *Hooligans or Rebels? A History of Respectable Fears* (London, Macmillan, 1983), p. 220.

this is done it may help explain why many adults express pessimism on behalf of the younger generations and their appropriation of “new” media.

On a cultural level, the panics are part of a cultural struggle. The gradual undermining through this century of the cultural elite as a critical force serves to reinforce the generational conflict already described. At the same time, the increasingly central position taken up by educational agencies vis a vis parents in the upbringing of the young has turned the question of character formation into a highly visible issue of public debate. The ones who have invested the most into gaining what Pierre Bourdieu terms consecrated cultural capital, are also the principal victims if this capital loses its currency.³⁸ Not surprisingly then, librarians, teachers and cultural critics have been instrumental in staging media panics. Again, we see the process of externalisation in operation, this time in terms of culture.

The focus is exclusively on children's and young people's use of *media*, while it is “forgotten” that most of their cultural practices are characterised by diversity of use more than by rigid divisions of form (mediated vs non-mediated uses).

Media panics, then, can be understood as tacit or explicit means of social regulation. This explanation corroborates Stanley Cohen's “safety valve” theory of the moral panic, while it emphasises that the social regulation is performed through a cultural character formation of the young. The media panics focus on the young precisely because, within the discourse of modernity, their development is the most decisive and the most vulnerable.

Sociological and cultural analysis may assist us in explaining the persistence of the panics as well as their focus on the young. But the analyses elide what is perhaps the most fundamental conundrum of the panics: the panic instigators speak in the name of reason, but their language is that of the emotions. This opposition between form and contents is found in all media panics. To understand it, we may turn to psycho-analytical analysis. To test the panic language, consider the above quotations and especially the metaphors. They centre on three symbolic registers, namely food (“poison”, “insipid fruit”), hygiene/health (“pollute”, “disease”), and sexuality (“licentious”, “indecent”, “seduction”, “promiscuity”). These registers immediately associate themselves with the oral, the anal and the genital phases of psychological development.

The recurrent symbolism, spanning more than two hundred years and several countries is revealing not so much by what it explicitly says as by what it tacitly assumes: popular culture in general and the mass media in particular are

³⁸See Pierre Bourdieu, *Les règles de l'art: genèse et structure du champ littéraire*, (Paris, Seuil, 1992), p. 176 [Eng. tr. *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* Cambridge, Polity Press].

associated with bodily functions that in most societies are socially and culturally regulated. Furthermore, within the perspective of modernity, these associations are heavily invested in gender and generational terms. As noted, both proponents and opponents of new media employ an opposition between information and emotion, print and visual forms of representation, an opposition that has to do with the possible loss of control. The metaphorical registers of (anal) hygiene/health and (genital) sexuality may serve to perspectivise this representational opposition. Both registers suggest that the media undermine our self-control and are very similar to a prostitute: not only do they entice us, so that we lose our senses, their proprietors are also in it only for the money. And many people need to go back. The whore, the *femme fatale*, these images of explicit female desire are conjured up in the denigration of the media.

According to the American literary critic Andreas Huyssen, the denigration of the popular is concomitant to an elevation of modernism (a concept denoting artistic forms of expression in modernity) from the end of the previous century on: it is the historical moment of the high/low divide in cultural criticism. The denigration is explained as a way for middle-class, male intellectuals of coming to terms with their own precarious position by externalising to women, and hence exterminating within themselves, dangerous aspects of their own personality, namely desire and emotionality.³⁹ This connection is very eye-opening to an understanding of the vehemence governing media panics. The feminine/popular comes to operate as a hidden Other of male modernism, high culture or art. Like the dark side of the moon, the invisibility of the feminine/popular serves to delineate and define high culture. But through this invisibility, the feminine/popular also points to its own absence in the critical discourse.

Still, the male-female opposition is an opposition that adults are forced to negotiate all the time. So this intricate connection appears as a tangible field of tension both in cultural criticism and in the discourses that inscribe everyday life. But to this dualism, I want to propose a third factor that equally operates as a defining principle in the media panics (and perhaps in the art/entertainment dichotomy at large). This principle is even more submerged than that of the feminine, and that is perhaps why it has received no critical attention. But it does surface in the metaphors used in the above quotations. For along with the symbols of anal and genital sexuality associated with femininity, there is the register of food. In Scandinavia, we apply English terms and speak of “junk”, “coke”, or “burger

³⁹See Andreas Huyssen, “Mass Culture As Woman: Modernism's Other,” in Tania Modleski (Ed.), *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture* (Bloomington, Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 188-207.

culture". In Britain one encounters trash literature, and in Germany one may find *Schundliteratur* and *Schundfilm*. This register refers to an even earlier stage, namely the oral phase, during which the infant makes no distinction between self and other. The prominence in the panics of references to this phase points to the childlike as perhaps the most important undercurrent in the debates: it equals self-forgetting involvement, abandonment, spontaneity.

Children and young people, I would argue, are prime objects of the media panics not merely because they are often media pioneers. Not merely because they challenge social and cultural power relations, nor because they symbolise ideological rifts. They are panic targets just as much because they inevitably represent experiences and emotions that are irrevocably lost to adults: one cannot go back in time and become a child again. Perhaps this common human condition becomes a particularly painful realisation in modernity because modernity is discursively based precisely on evolution and a linear progression of time. To modern adults, children become captive symbols of what is lost not only in an individual sense, but in a social sense. The male-female opposition is malleable, it may be negotiated and confronted. But the child-adult opposition is not open to the same kind of options: childhood becomes a "paradise lost".

In his *Passagen-Werk*, Walter Benjamin links the development of the child and of modernity. In both cases, the realisation of loss is a fundamental experience - Benjamin speaks about awakening.⁴⁰ Loss may be mourned because it is past, or by contrast, it may be a source of inspiration because it can be recalled as loss. I think Benjamin's analysis is cogent to my discussion of the childlike as an undercurrent governing media panics. For just as one may evaluate loss in positive or negative terms, so adults living in a dynamic society attempt to negotiate the concept of the lost paradise of childhood in two opposite ways: one may emphasise the loss more than the paradise and evaluate childhood negatively as the phase resulting in adult division and disintegration. Or, one may stress the paradisaical unity more than the loss, and then childhood becomes a positive proof that change is still a personal option in modernity. In the media panics, the childlike is primarily negative: the media threaten to poison or choke us (an association to the infant's fear of the all-powerful mother?), or they lead to social and mental destruction. The positive associations to the childlike are found in the views on cultural discrimination, according to which children have an "instinct" for cultural quality.

⁴⁰See Susan Buck-Morss, "Benjamin's *Passagen-Werk*: Redeeming Mass Culture for the Revolution," *New German Critique*, XXIX (1983), pp. 211-240; Id., *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1989).

The media panics do not tell us much about actual media. But as cultural seismographs, they reveal broader problems of modernity. If it is true, as I claim, that the panics are one way of addressing and trying to balance an inherent modern paradox, then it is perhaps in line with the irony of history that the panics themselves feed on a paradox: they are based on one or more Others that - through their very absence - remain central sources of renewed attacks. It is impossible to speak "about" these Others. On the other hand, without them it is impossible to speak at all.

Beyond panics?

The psychological insights point to the limits of panic history both as discourse and as analytical category. Panic activists repeatedly apply the emotions in their struggle for rationality and common sense. But not only that. They equally struggle against emotions within themselves. Thus, one cannot argue with panic proponents, and it is no good trying to prove irrationalities or logical flaws. Panic discourses cannot be countered discursively. That is ultimately why critics of new media continue their allegations of crime despite commission reports and empirical studies. That is also why direct behaviourist explanations of media effects retain their currency in the panics despite theoretical developments. The emotional undercurrents of the panics are determining factors in selecting what can surface and what must remain hidden in the discourse.

This process, in its turn, enforces analytical self-reflexion: why do some of us become professionally engaged with media panics? Do we react on panics with ridicule, disgust, or indifference? Through our deconstruction of the panic discourse, we reveal our own anxieties, preferences and concerns. We are part of the discourse too. Media panics tackle central questions about cultural quality, personal development and social change under the rubric of character formation. Whether we like it or not, we are part of that discourse if only because many of us occupy positions of interpretation and evaluation as teachers, researchers or media professionals. The media panics may escape our attention, but their basic problematics affect us nevertheless. Children and young people may occupy key roles as cultural innovators, but adults cannot escape their responsibility to regulate which of the cultural competencies are to be legitimated as competencies with a social currency.

Analysis provides no neat recipees to enter or, indeed, close the panics. But it may clarify the basis of discourse and our own position in it. We may realise that we are deeply implicated in complex ethical questions, but we may equally find that we hold a stake in the possible answers. This kind of self-reflexion, in my

opinion, is central to any analysis of cultural signification. In the case of media panics, their history even holds the key to cultural action. Given the structure of media panics, such action has to take its point of departure outside the intensive atmosphere of the panics - that is in the more mundane and contradictory practices of everyday culture. Through this contextualisation, we may widen the narrow perspective on sex and violence found in most panics and begin to ask: what are the varieties and complexities in juvenile media culture? What are the relations between mediated and non-mediated forms of cultural expression? How do these relations change over time? Moreover, by acknowledging the structural ambiguities in our own regulatory roles we may begin to change the perspective of the panics by respecting children's own perceptions and asking for their evaluations of their media cultures.⁴¹ Asking such questions and respecting children's answers does not necessarily imply a populist embrace of everything they say and the media they favour. But it does open a space of dialogue between adult and juvenile judgments, tastes and pleasures - a space that adults may learn as much from as children.

⁴¹See David Buckingham, "Electronic Child Abuse: Rethinking the Media's Effects on Children," in Barker & Petley, *Ill Effects*, pp. 32-47.